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With stories of gunmen, would-be child-nappers and the usual assortment of perverts in the news, you can understand how a little Arlington Heights girl might be freaked to find a couple of strange men waiting for her.

Even if those men are agents of the Department of Homeland Security.

We'll not use the girl's name since she's hesitant these days about giving her real name to strangers. She's only 10.

On Nov. 29, with her dad out of town for business and her mom having left for work, the girl was following her morning ritual with Jeb, the family's unimposing Shih Tzu.

"I just let Jeb out, then I let him in, and then I go to school," the girl says, explaining how she steps out the front door onto the driveway and into a backyard that connects to her school's playground.

She was in her driveway a little before 9 a.m. on her quiet cul-de-sac when men she didn't know, wearing blue jeans and leather jackets, hopped from a car.

"These two men -- there was a black guy and a white guy -- they just walked up to me," she says. "I saw them get out of the car. They yelled, 'Do you have a minute?'"

"I just felt scared," the fifth-grader says, all the "stranger danger" rules running through her head. "They came up to me. I didn't know what to do, so I said, 'Yeah.' "

One of the men pulled out an identification card.

"It was a beige card with a picture in the right corner. I only had time to look at the picture because I was already late to school," the girl says.

"They asked me how old I was. I said 10, and they wrote that down," she says.

When they asked for her full name, she hesitated. They had a paper with names of people on it, so she told them.

"Then they showed me a picture and asked if I ever saw this girl," she says, unsure if the photo subject could have been someone she's seen at a neighbor's.

"When I got to school, I wanted to call my mom," says the girl, whose teacher sent her to talk with the school nurse and principal. "I just told them I talked to these two men, and it really scared me."

Patton Elementary School Principal Donna Devine heard the girl's story and called police.

"It did sound like a stranger-danger kind of thing," Devine says. "I just wanted to make sure she was safe and all the children in the neighborhood were safe."

Devine also phoned the girl's mom, Jennifer Smith, who immediately left her Catholic Charities job at a senior center, where she is an elder-abuse investigator.

As someone whose job exposes her to the worst human motives, an emotional Smith played out all the "what could have happened" scenarios in her head as she sped to school.

"I was shaking," the mom remembers. "Everything was going through my brain in that 10 minutes."

When mom and daughter reunited, the girl "just bawled," Smith says. "She was shaking."

Scott Smith says he talked to his daughter by phone.

"I told her she did the right thing, because she was pretty darn upset," the dad says.

Longtime neighbor Lynda Dezura, who watched from a window, says one of the men had knocked on another neighbor's door for 10 minutes, so she figured they weren't prowling pedophiles. But she kept an eye on them as they approached the Smith girl.

"I stood there and watched because she was 10 years old," Dezura says. "I wanted to make sure nothing happened."

The girl's grandparents live a block away. Her grandpa rushed to the house where he and the police discovered the "strangers" were Department of Homeland Security agents for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"We felt a little better when we found out it was Homeland Security, but then my mind is saying, 'Who the hell do you think you are coming up to a 10-year-old girl on my property?' " Jennifer Smith says.

The agents had been parked in the neighborhood that morning, and one was still there when Jennifer Smith came home and told the agent how much he had scared her daughter.

"He just said, 'Well, (the girl's real name) did not seem too scared of me,' " Smith recalls, her voice rising at the memory. "For him to say my daughter's name, I was upset."

She called Congressman Mark Kirk's office in Northbrook to complain. His staffers called Homeland Security, and Kirk immediately dashed off a letter asking Homeland Security's Office of Professional Responsibility to review the agents' actions.

"They admitted to us that ICE agents are not to question children without their parents present," Kirk says. "This agent may need to be taken to the principal's office."

But that isn't the case in this incident, Tim Counts, a spokesman for Homeland Security, said Friday. Counts said brief questioning outside with a child isn't the same as a formal interview. Counts said they would need parental permission if the child or another family member was under investigation.

"There were no policy or laws violated. Everything was according to protocol," Counts said. He said the girl walked toward the agents as they approached her house.

In response to questions, the child said her parents weren't home, and she didn't have the answers the men were seeking, Counts said.

"So the agents thanked her and walked away," Counts said. "She did not appear afraid or upset in any way. ... Certainly, it was not our agents' intentions to upset her."

"While we do not believe our agents did anything wrong," Counts said, Kirk's request for a review will be granted.

Far from a rabble-rouser or a liberal looking to make political hay, Smith is a self-described "full Republican" who says she voted for George W. Bush twice. But she thinks Homeland Security went too far in questioning her daughter, who was still frightened enough days later to insist on

chatting with mom by cell phone during her short walk to school.

"Every time I walk out, I just make sure no one is there," the girl says. "If this ever happens again, run the other way."

Her parents say they want to make sure Homeland Security agents don't scare kids.

"I'd like a letter from the Homeland Security supervisor," Jennifer Smith says. "I'd like an apology."